United Nations ST/IC/1999/111

Secretariat

29 December 1999

Information circular*

To: Members of the staff

From: The Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management

Subject: **Mental health — Medical and employee assistance facilities****

I. Introduction

1. Mental health has been defined as not simply the absence of detectable mental disease but a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to contribute to his or her community.[1] Mental health issues are increasingly recognized throughout the world, including in large organizations that share and reflect the characteristics of society at large. This is also the case for the United Nations where staff, whether at Headquarters or in the field, often serve in duty stations far removed from their countries of origin and familiar cultural or family settings. Adjustment to living in a different host country and working with multiple cultures and languages is not always easy. Some assignments and missions involve extensive travel, and at times presence in crisis situations and danger spots.

2. There are many types of mental health conditions or diseases, which vary greatly from individual to individual in degree of severity and in the manner in which they manifest themselves. When one or more of these conditions occur, health professionals and professionals participating in employee assistance programmes agree on the benefits of early detection, acknowledgment of the situation and action so that individuals may recover their ability to engage in normal activities as soon as and whenever possible.

3. There are a number of resources available to assist staff members in dealing with these and other related situations. They are described in section III below. Section IV sets out a summary of the rights and entitlements available to staff members whose health is impaired.

II. Purpose of the circular

4. The main purpose of the present circular is to remind staff that the policy of the United Nations is to treat all staff members equally, whatever the reasons that may affect their health, and to engender a more open, supportive and effective approach to mental health. This is even more the case during times of change and the consequential uncertainty that normally follows. Staff members are reminded that, along with their obligations to work to the best of their ability, they have the opportunity and the responsibility to seek assistance when they are unable to work for any health-related reason.

5. In this connection, all staff are encouraged to use to the fullest extent the existing medical and employee assistance services described in section III below. They apply to situations involving mental health issues, as well as any other situation involving health concerns. Supervisors and staff members are reminded that many mental health conditions can be successfully treated by qualified

* The present circular reissues the text of information circular ST/IC/1997/82, which will expire on 31 December 1999. This circular will be in effect until further notice.

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professionals by appropriate means, including medications and therapy. It should always be remembered that, if successfully treated, a mental health condition does not constitute lack of fitness to work.

6. Given the nature of mental health conditions, it is not always possible for the individual concerned to recognize his/her need for assistance or treatment. Thus, if a supervisor or colleague, including a staff representative, notices a sudden change in behaviour, attitude or performance, he/she may draw the attention of their human resources officer or the Medical Service or the Staff Counsellor to the situation, as appears appropriate under the circumstances.

III. Medical and employee assistance facilities

Medical facilities

7. The United Nations Medical Director oversees the medical services offered by the Organization at Headquarters and the regional commissions, as well as 50 dispensaries throughout the world. The system offers services to maintain and improve the health of staff, including examinations and referrals to medical professionals trained to diagnose and treat physical and mental illness.

8. The medical records of a staff member are completely confidential. They are kept in the Medical Service, and are not released to the Administration or any other party without the consent of the staff member. In order to help ensure confidentiality, the medical clearances required for initial appointment, change of duty station or detail to mission service do not contain any information that would indicate that a staff member has or previously had a mental health condition or any other medical condition, and are designed only to indicate fitness to work in a certain occupation and/or at a given duty station or mission. However, when a claim is made under Appendix D to the Staff Rules for death, injury or illness incurred in the service of the United Nations, or for a disability benefit under the Regulations and Rules of the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund, information of a medical nature, such as diagnosis and degree of seriousness of the condition, will be communicated to the bodies competent to consider the claims.

9. For staff and supervisors wishing to educate themselves on issues of mental health, the Headquarters Medical Service Library has available various reading materials concerning such issues as depression, anxiety and panic disorder.

Staff Counsellor and other employee assistance facilities

10. The Organization provides a Staff Counsellor in New York. The Staff Counsellor's Office, located on the fifth floor of the Secretariat building, is available for individual consultations for support and assistance on many mental health issues. Issues are addressed as quickly as possible and, if required, referrals are made to appropriate sources of assistance, in-house or in the staff member's local community. All dealings with the Staff Counsellor and his staff, including consultations, are strictly confidential. Any action on behalf of a staff member is undertaken only with his or her consent. Consultations yield closed-door advice outside the administrative process. Nothing is communicated by the Counsellor elsewhere in the Organization, unless it is specifically requested by the staff member.

11. Similar functions are carried out at a number of other duty stations by staff members specifically designated for that purpose. Staff members are encouraged to enquire from the local personnel service or section about the existence and location of such facilities at any particular duty station or mission, and to take full advantage of all existing facilities.

IV. Summary of benefits and entitlements available to staff members whose health is impaired

Health insurance

12. Insurance coverage for mental health treatment is governed by specified terms and conditions under each health insurance plan offered to staff members by the United Nations. Details regarding coverage are set out in the related administrative issuances.[2] Additional information regarding coverage and benefits under the Headquarters health insurance plans may be obtained from the Insurance, Claims and Compensation Section. Enquiries regarding coverage and benefits under the "Geneva" plans should be directed to the Insurance Unit, Financial Resources Management Service, Division of Administration, at the United Nations Office at Geneva and, for staff at the United Nations Office at Vienna, should be directed to the Staff Welfare Office of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization. Coverage and benefits information under the Van Breda and the Medical Insurance Plan schemes should in the first instance be addressed to the Chief of Administration at the local duty station.

Sick leave provisions for physical or mental health conditions available to qualifying staff members

13. Sick leave is determined by the type of appointment that a staff member holds at the time of the leave. The maximum leave permitted for each type of appointment is set out below.

(a) **100 series**. A staff member holding a fixed-term appointment of less than one year under the 100 series of the Staff Rules may be granted sick leave credit at the rate of two working days per month of contractual service. A staff member holding a probationary appointment or a fixed-term appointment of one year or longer but less than three years may be granted sick leave up to 3 months on full salary and 3 months on half salary in any period of 12 consecutive months. A staff member who holds a permanent or indefinite appointment, who holds a fixed-term appointment for three years or who has completed three years of continuous service may be granted sick leave up to nine months on full salary and nine months on half salary in any period of four consecutive years;

(b) **200 series**. Project personnel in short-term status may be granted sick leave on full salary at the rate of two days per month of service. Project personnel in intermediate-term status may be granted sick leave up to 3 months on full salary and up to 3 months on half salary in any period of 12 consecutive months, provided that the amount of sick leave permitted in any four consecutive years shall not exceed 18 months, 9 months on full salary and 9 months on half salary. Project personnel in long-term status may be granted sick leave up to nine months on full salary and nine months on half salary in any period of four consecutive years;

(c) **300 series**. For staff on appointments of limited duration and short-term appointments under the 300 series of the Staff Rules, sick leave may be granted at the rate of two working days for each full month of continuous service.

14. Staff members may be granted sick leave for a period of more than three consecutive working days only upon producing a certificate from a duly qualified medical practitioner.

15. For further information, staff at Headquarters may visit the Medical Service Sick Leave Inquiry Desk on the fifth floor of the Secretariat building, or consult directly with their Executive Office.

Disability benefit under the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund

16. A staff member becomes a participant in the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund upon commencing an appointment for six months or longer, or upon accepting such an appointment while in employment, or upon completing six months of service without an interruption of more than 30 days. A participant will receive a disability benefit if found to be incapacitated for further service in a position reasonably compatible with his or her abilities, when the disability is a result of injury or illness constituting an impairment to health likely to be permanent or of long duration. In order to award a disability benefit, the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Committee must be satisfied that there is sufficient medical evidence to establish that the illness or injury qualifies the staff member for the benefit. For further information, staff members should consult their human resources officer.

Medical evacuations

17. Subject to the applicable rules and procedures, which require a medical report documenting the need for evacuation, medical evacuation may be arranged for international staff in the field (including those governed by the 200 and 300 series of the Staff Rules), and exceptionally for locally recruited staff.

Notes

[1] Robert Desjarlais, Leon Eisenberg, Byron Good and Arthur Kleinman, *World Mental Health* (New York, Oxford University Press, Inc., 1995), p. 7.

[2] Information circular ST/IC/1999/41, entitled "Renewal of the Headquarters medical and dental insurance plans effective 1 July 1999, and annual enrolment campaign, 7-11 June 1999", information circular ST/IC/1999/110, entitled "Van Breda medical, hospital and dental insurance" (for staff at offices away from Headquarters), and administrative instruction ST/AI/343, entitled "Medical insurance plan for locally recruited staff at designated duty stations away from Headquarters".